

**Susan Burton, Executive Director**  
**A New Way of Life**  
**Testimony to the Little Hoover Commission**  
**May 27, 2004**

I am here today to talk about A New Way of Life. A solution to the statewide problem of people being released from prisons without resources. The people I am talking about specifically are women.

But before I talk about A New Way of Life I would want to give you some history on myself. Because 70% of the women I house have a similar history. So if you could, as I tell my history, picture a woman walking out of Chowchilla State Prison this morning.

I am a native of California. As a child I endured every kind of abuse imaginable. I never can remember feeling safe. By my 15 birthday I had given birth to my first child as a result of gang rape. Shortly after I could no longer continue to endure the abuse of my family so I ran away from home falling prey to the streets of South L.A. At that point I began to use drugs and alcohol. At age 25 I had a second child, a son. He was killed by a policeman in 1982. Up until that point, my life had been extremely difficult but I held on. My son's death was the straw that broke the camel's back. I could no longer hold on. I began to use cocaine heavily. I did not know how to handle all that had happened. I became addicted and was sentenced to prison. I was sentenced to prison four times before I was able to discharge from parole. I was always sentenced for being in possession of a controlled substance. (crack cocaine). That substance was so prevalent in our community.

Every time I left prison I vowed to get my life back on track but failed. I did not know the tremendous odds against me. The last time I paroled I fell again and a friend told me I could get some help at a program called CLARE Foundation. October 4, 1997 I entered treatment and stayed there for a little more than 100 days. What I found there I had been in search of for 45 years. A safe place to go through stages of development. I have been quite open with the details of my life because it is relevant to the women who come to my home looking for a safe place to recreate their lives. What I have told you here today are the bare-boned facts of my life. The events may vary for the residents at A New Way of Life but the experiences are very similar.

I returned to my community and by 1999 I was able to purchase a small home. Understanding the difficulties women face after incarceration and knowing how unfair this is, I opened my home to women coming home from prison. A New Way of Life has been very successful. I believe my effort has been well-received because I meet each woman where they are. I let them know the circumstances they are presently in, are understandable to me. But now that they have a place to live and work from, it is not understandable for their lives to remain hopeless. It is their obligation to themselves to put the pieces of their life together again. I will help however I can. For the time being the have their living needs met – food, shelter, clothing and hygiene items. They can stay as long as they follow rules and work toward independence. There is no hierarchy. We

are all women moving and pulling together. It is instilled that one of our roles is to remain grateful to have found a way out and help the next woman to find her way also.

The barriers paroling women face daily is horrendous. After working with paroling women for three years I opened a second home for women with their children. It was heartbreaking to watch women losing their children for life because they were unable to meet the court requirement for housing. I watched them jump through hoops to do everything they possibly could short of breaking the law in order to return to parenting, in spite of being banned from welfare for life, banned from school and public housing.

That home is doing well also. When I say it is doing well I mean in terms of getting women out of the criminal justice system, healing old trauma, restoring hopes and dreams. – allowing women to have a sense of belonging, direction and purpose. That is all we ever wanted. Lastly our second home has allowed women to get back custody of their children and to intervene in the fast track adoption process. With all this type of success I continually struggle to find resources.

A New Way of Life receives about 20 letters a month from women who want to come there upon parole and women who request letters for board dates. There is no way I can respond to all of the demand for housing. While there is a network of homes in Los Angeles County that I refer the overflow of request to, more recovery support and prison aftercare is needed. The network of recovery support homes is called the Sober Living Coalition. Participating homes must meet a health and safety standard and agree to operate under a code of ethics.

We talk about barriers to reentry and how long they go on. I have applied for a certificate of rehabilitation and have been told I am ineligible because of the code I was discharged under. The Welfare & Institution Code 3201 Subsection C. I ask you when does it stop.